

## Exemplar 14

### Course area: Genealogy



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This Exemplar illustrates the supportive value of the classroom environment when learners are first starting to go online.

I have combined online with face-to-face in a number of ways. At the moment, I'm running a course about genealogy—that is, for people who want to find out about their ancestry. People come into the course with some family information and an interest in finding out more, and I take it from there.

When learners start the course, they get a CD with basic software like Acrobat Reader and WinZip, a list of census data available on the internet, and a free program developed by the Mormons that was designed to support searching for family information and recording that information. The CD will allow them to load the software onto their home computers. Once it is installed, learners can work away at home, then bring the results back to class and do some more work there.

While the course is about genealogy, participants also learn a great deal about using computers. If they're not familiar already, they learn to use email, to do various sorts of searches on the internet, to use databases and to participate in lists.

A list is an online community of people who communicate with each other via email on certain set topics. The community functions with the support of a moderator. Once you've joined, you can post queries, and usually someone will try to help. For example, one of my students wanted to investigate their family history in a county in Wales. A member of the list based over there had access to the archives, and mailed my student the information she was seeking.

The class in genealogy is fairly small—six people. They come from very different backgrounds. I've got everyone from the President of the local historical society to farmers. Their knowledge of computers varies a lot.

When you have people in the group who are not very strong on computers, it is better to include some face-to-face contact. If all of my students were experienced computer users, you could easily conduct the whole course online. I did a course myself on genealogy that was totally online, and I enjoyed it—but I'm used to computers. But when people who are less experienced get stuck, it helps to have the structure and support of the classroom. Feedback from students bears this out:

*'I found the course very interesting and learnt quite a lot from the internet resources. But I've probably learnt more through talking to our teacher face to face.'*

*'I have limited computer skills, and could not have done this course without a tutor present. At the end of the course I had learnt a lot about using the computer and the internet generally. Now, I think I could use the internet alone.'*

*'I have no Internet connection at home, so having this course in a classroom with access was great.'*

Even though people come along with their own projects that they want to work on, there is a definite structure to the class. One week, we might all look at a particular set of web resources together, and each class-member applies these to their projects. Another week, we'll do something different.

It doesn't always go smoothly. Sometimes, it's a struggle to stay in control. For example, in one recent class, things started to go sideways. What can happen is that your time gets taken up with the less skilled people, who can easily get stuck. You bounce from one question and demand to another, and before you know it, you've lost control. By then, the more capable people have rushed ahead, and they get lost, too. They are not sure what is supposed to happen next.

So you need a definite structure, and you need to resist the sense of urgency people put out when they run into difficulty. Next time I run this, I'm planning on having a timetable I give students so they know what to expect each session: 'For the next 30 minutes, we will be doing X. For the next hour, we will do Y.'

Another thing I've learnt from running this course is that it would be useful to do some sort of pre-course survey or assessment to determine people's level of computer skills. I haven't done that with this group, and it took me a while to discover how much people knew or didn't know. It's taken a while to appreciate their range.

If you were observing my class, one thing you'd really notice would be the excitement in the room when someone finds something they've been looking for. Like my student getting the information from Wales. It was great!

You'd also notice people's frustration at times. We're working in a networked lab with only modem access to the internet, so sites can take an age to open and to move through. I'm hoping this is about to change. We're part of the Rural Link project, which is working towards faster network access. They're putting up a dish now, so hopefully this whole area will improve. But access speed is a big issue in all rural areas.

Overall, this course has been a big success. People don't want it to end. It is really only introductory, learning the tools you need to investigate your ancestry. But there is scope to go much further, and that is what I anticipate my group will do. The Mormon software lets you move on to a higher level—for example, to display the information you've collected on your own tailor-made website, so your family history is online. You can also create and display your family tree.

Another course development project that I'm involved in is for people wanting to improve their literacy. They enroll in the accredited Certificate in General Education for Adults. Typically, people who do the course have left school early. Online learning is good for this group because you can have people doing the course from different locations.

At the moment, it is not run purely online. But beginning next year, you'll have a choice. You will be able to do it fully online, or through a mix of online and face-to-face.

The concept I've got for this course is to use an Adult Learning Australia Learning Circle kit called 'Discovering Democracy'. These kits are designed for self-directed discussion groups, but what attracted me is that this one has a lot of activities that involve basic literacy skills. You're expected to analyse ideas, to make comments, to write reports, and it is all related to life in Australia and different forms of government.

Next year, this will be a pilot, but the plan after that is to integrate it into the accredited literacy course.

### Comments on my own learning...

I've moved gradually into using more online approaches. Early on, I did a few courses. For example, over the internet, I enrolled in and completed a course in HTML and website design. That gave me exactly what I wanted—the ability to design a simple website.

I also participated in a course funded by *LearnScope*, which was called Online ACE 2001. This was a course for TAFE and ACE practitioners, run over ten weeks. It looked at a wide range of online options, like chat, lists and various sites. This year, I was involved in Online ACE 2002 as one of the facilitators.

I participated in *NET\*Working 2002*. It was good, but not as good as it was when they first ran it in 2000. There was too much happening on the site this time, and I didn't participate much. They are running something similar in Victoria<sup>10</sup> soon, and I will be one of the hosts. One of the sessions I'm co-presenting looks at what it is like to be an online mentor.



10 The TAFE VC e-conference, run during October 2002. See [www.tafevc.com.au/econf](http://www.tafevc.com.au/econf)